CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method for controlling access to a product, the method comprising the steps of:

    (a) receiving a request for a product;

    (b) generating, substantially at the time the request is received, a license string that controls access to the product; and

    (c) transmitting the license string to the requestor.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein step (a) comprises receiving a request via a distributed communications network.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein step (a) comprises:

    (a-a) receiving a request for a product; and

    (a-b) receiving payment information from the requestor.

4. The method of claim 3 further comprising the step of verifying the received payment information.

5. The method of claim 1 wherein step (b) comprises using a cryptographic process to generate a license string that controls access to the product.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein step (b) comprises using a cryptographic process to generate a license string encoding a character text string, the license string controlling access to the product when supplied by the requestor.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein step (b) comprises using a cryptographic process to generate a license string encoded as an upper case alphanumeric string, the characters in the text string excluding capital O, capital I, and numbers 0 and 1, the license string controlling access to the product when supplied by the requestor.

1 8. The method of claim 1 wherein step (b) comprises using a cryptographic process to
2 generate a license string encoding:
3   the date of creation of the license string;
4   the number of users enabled by the license string; and
5   the type of license string created.

1 9. The method of claim 8 wherein step (b) further comprises including validation
2 information in the generated string.

1 10. The method of claim 1 wherein step (b) comprises generating, substantially at the time
2 the request is received, a license string that controls access to a single facility.

1 11. The method of claim 1 wherein step (b) comprises generating, substantially at the time
2 the request is received, a license string that controls access to multiple facilities.

1 12. The method of claim 1 wherein step (c) comprises transmitting the license string to the
2 requestor via a distributed communications network.

3 13. The method of claim 1 wherein the product functions for only a predetermined period
4 of time before the license string is entered.

1 14. The method of claim 13 wherein the license string extends the predetermined period of
2 time for which the product will function.

1 15. A system for controlling access to a product, the system comprising:
2   an input unit receiving a request for a product;
3   a license string generator in electrical communication with said input unit, said
4 license string generator producing, substantially at the time a request is received, a
5 license string that controls access to the product;
6   an output unit transmitting the license string to the requestor.

1 16. The system of claim 15 wherein said input unit is in electrical communication with a
2 network and said input unit receives a request for a product via the network.

17. The system of claim 15 wherein said license string generator uses a cryptographic engine to produce a license string.

18. The system of claim 15 wherein said license string generator generates a license string controlling access to a single facility.

19. The system of claim 15 wherein said license string generator generates a license string controlling access to multiple facilities.

20. The system of claim 15 wherein said output unit is in electrical communication with a network and said output unit transmits the product and the associated license string to the requestor via the network.

21. An article of manufacture having computer-readable program means embodied thereon, the computer-readable program means comprising the system of claim 15.

22. An article of manufacture having computer-readable program means for electronically distributing a product, the computer-readable program means comprising:

computer-readable program means for receiving a request for a product;

computer-readable program means for generating a license string that enables the product when supplied by the requestor;

computer-readable program means for associating the license string with the product; and

computer-readable program means for transmitting the product and the associated license string to the requestor.

23. The article of manufacture of claim 22 further comprising computer-readable program means for receiving payment information from the requestor.